

# A public for democracy: overcoming mediated segregation in Turkey

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[Britta Ohm](#) [1] 22 July 2013

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In this context, “Gezi”, as a synonym for all the places in Turkey where protests and citizen forums have sprung up, is not as much about solidarity as it is about the albeit tentative discovery of common-ness through the very defence of the commons.

The large-scale protests that began to be staged in Turkey at the end of May mark not only the first time in the history of the republic that self-organised diverse citizens in large numbers have directly confronted a government, rather than the state or adversarial political/societal groups. It is also the most public upheaval that Turkey has ever seen and that the world has seen in Turkey. This contrasts, for instance, with either the Kurdish insurgency, of whose devastating consequences neither media audiences in Turkey or abroad ever saw anything more than flying planes and helicopters, coffins of dead soldiers and determined faces of generals; or the partly state-sponsored violent clashes between socialists and ultra-nationalists that paved the way to the 1980-military coup, that were thoroughly censored (and virtually wiped out the left); or the Islamic movement that made its way carefully and against many odds through the institutions and into everyday life (though not carefully enough to avoid being confronted by another military coup, the so-called “postmodern coup” of 1997, whose date, 28 February, is a key reference amongst Islamic people in Turkey but holds little meaning beyond).<sup>[1]</sup>

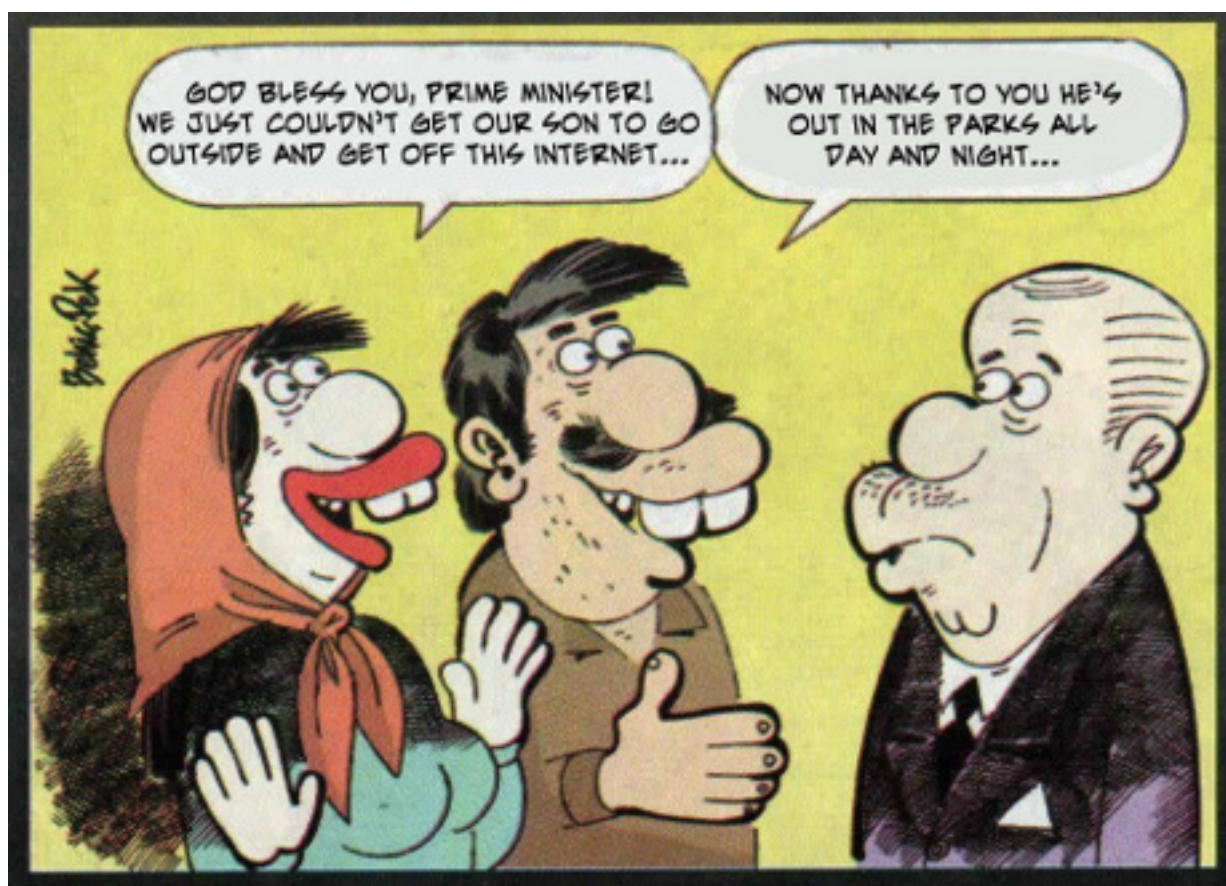
The very public-ness of these protests now, however, and the government’s various efforts to “de-publicise” them, also questions the “important role” that has been, if foreseeably, credited to “the media” in bringing it about –chiefly by the media themselves.

This is not to deny that the media dimension that has been unfolding here is pivotal. Various media allow me and many others to keep in constant touch with events, friends, family and interlocutors in Turkey in a way that has either not been possible (because internet connections and social media accounts have skyrocketed only recently) or not deemed necessary before (because things were unsatisfactory but stable).

Yet, media have not simply been significant in the dichotomous way that has been applied, often without any closer look at the respective situation, to nearly every one of the globally mounting contemporary protests, where social media and internet are expected to democratically undermine oppressive national mass media. What makes these protests so exceptional, and at the same time so exceptionally vulnerable to usurpation from different sides, is rather that they are not about media, or media-based at their core, but on various levels transcend media as an organising societal force.

Inadvertently, the protestors showed the limits of media and representation in contrast to the active, physical togetherness of hitherto deeply divided groups of people in the real public space, the direct getting-to-know each other, seeing each other, speaking with each other, learning about and from each other, organising things together, and, increasingly, suffering together, helping each other during relentless attacks of teargas and water cannon and, also, joining in burying and commemorating the dead.

As one friend told me who was in Gezi Park before it was raided and closed down by the police on 15 June: "It was strange, many of us were online all the time to coordinate activities, and that was very important, because it also carried what we did in Gezi Park to the outside, but we felt how different this was from actually holding meetings and talking." This cartoon - one of hundreds building on a long and often underestimated tradition, that have been produced alongside an outpouring of street art, performance and graffiti in what Zeynep Tufekci has aptly called a spirit of "anti-postmodern pluralism"<sup>[2]</sup> - emphasises the priority of direct communication:



In this context, "Gezi", as a synonym for all the places in Turkey where protests and citizen forums have sprung up, is also not as much about solidarity as it is about the, albeit tentative, discovery of common-ness through the very defence of the commons. It thus points beyond the national confines of an anti-government protest that international media have increasingly insisted on seeing - quite in accord with the Turkish government itself.

Rather, "Gezi" reaffirms and at the same time re-defines the neoliberalised jargon of global-local, leading back to the park itself as a place of local public life and politics, while holding significance

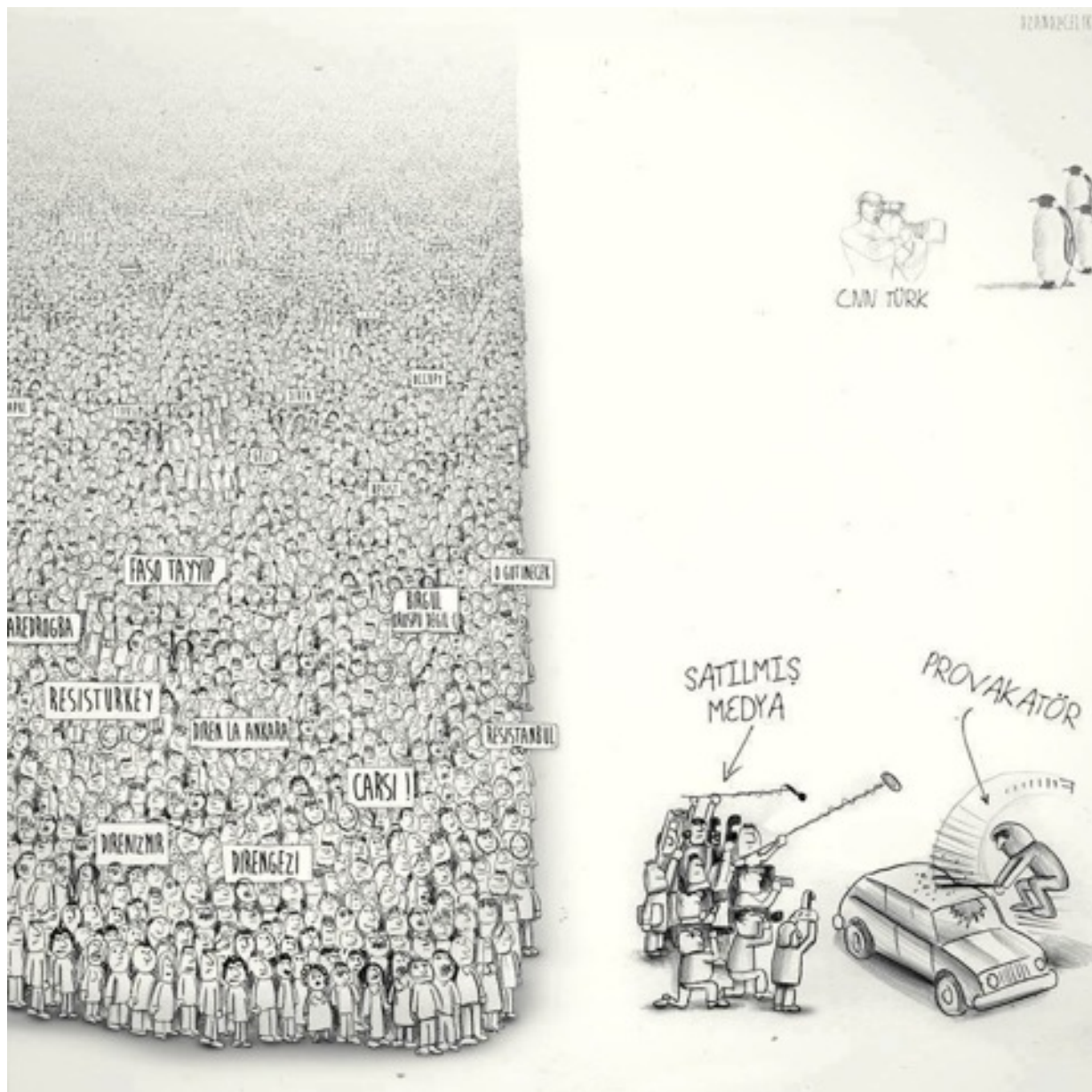
well beyond Turkey as it speaks of society's finding of a new understanding of itself as society – a society that is open to all. In contrast to much of the anti-austerity protest in Europe or anti-corruption protest in India, which has been about the protection and distribution of wealth, and securing one's own share, as they developed these protests have confronted the ideology of mindless growth, the privatisation of responsibility, inclusion and exclusion, and the segregation and atomisation of people.

The same friend added: "This was the first time that it was not about pushing forward the demands of one particular group or of something abstract, an ideology that you either subscribe to or you don't. It was about something we all knew and increasingly missed in our daily lives: trees. Very concrete, something we could all touch and that we connected with life and our future. It sounds so naïve, but it is what brought us together, so it's not naïve at all. Imagine, it made *ulusalcılar* (laicist ultra-nationalists) and Kurds talk with each other, they sat under these trees and spoke and listened!"

Clearly, this had looked outright impossible for any foreseeable future even twelve months ago, when I conducted my latest interviews with ultra-nationalist and neo-Kemalist TV producers and journalists in Istanbul. Our talks, and their programming, underlined the sheer lack of imagination on their part that people could "really", by their own choice or inner impulse, entertain religion, or elevate their Kurdish before a Turkish identity, without being instigated and organised by "foreign forces" out to malign and weaken the independence of the laicist Turkish republic.

Conspiracy theories, now employed by Prime Minister Erdoğan against the protestors, are historically, and not without reason<sup>[3]</sup>, a powerful instrument (not only) in Turkish politics and media, paving the way to the criminalisation of dissent, diverting attention from "what is actually happening" and segregating people into fractious groups, to keep them under control. In fact, it has been a vital practical component of the uprising to dismantle, through acknowledging the reality of others, the very ground for conspiracy theories - which accounts for so much of the incredible energy and creativity the protests have generated but also necessitate, particularly with regard to media, as this cartoon indicates:





It refers to the events in Taksim square on 11 June, when police, as the government claimed, were obliged to heavily advance against vandalising aggressors throwing stones and Molotov cocktails, said to have emerged from the adjacent Gezi Park. It was the first incident of the protests that mainstream corporate TV channels and pro-government media (shown here as *satılmış* – “bought”/corrupt media) covered to any extent. During the first police attacks on Gezi Park on 31 May they had discovered their great fondness for animal documentaries instead - especially penguins, which CNN Türk (a franchise of CNN USA without editorial links) aired and which involuntarily expressed the absurdity of the situation, instantly turning the penguin into the prime symbol of the protestors. The violence on 11 June, by contrast, marked the unprecedented constellation of the government – or rather Erdoğan, as other government members had increasingly fallen out of the picture – directly facing a freshly emerged public in terms of narrative and counter-narrative.

Erdoğan's version of the event, which now credited the media with maintaining a neutral role as they did their job in a situation of violence against public and private property, managed to put the protestors into a defensive position and turned their description of the situation, pictured in this cartoon, into just another counter-version. What they claimed was that the violent aggressors were "actually" undercover civil police officers who acted as *agents provocateurs* for a subservient media - and hence for Erdoğan's supporters who were assumed to be sitting in front of their tellies - to divert attention from the legitimate demands of Turkish citizens whose number far exceeded the groups in Gezi Park.

Social media and oppositional TV stations, including the small *ulusalci* and neo-Kemalist *Halk TV* and *Ulus TV*, quickly tried to circulate “evidence” for this description, particularly of one of the “attackers”, whose bulging pocket trouser indicated a pistol and who could not possibly be one of the Gezi protestors. The power of Erdoğan in this situation, however, consisted in setting majoritarianism (here in terms of numbers watching television) against democracy. It is unclear how many of his supporters really saw what he apparently wanted them to see: a bunch of *çapulcular* (looters) out to steal and destroy other people’s – *their* – hard-earned possessions. It may have played its part in the subsequent self-organised violence of AKP-supporters against protestors, and it may have prompted even Wikipedia to list “vandalism” as one of the “methods of protest” in the respective entry.<sup>[4]</sup> Fundamentally, though, because the mainstream media held the advantage of visual evidence on their side, the situation was turned into one in which the protestors were forced into operating within the logic of conspiracy theories. Truth, rather than reality, became, yet again, a matter of belief and unconditional loyalty to a group, a matter of interpretation and counter-interpretation.

At the same time the cartoon shows something else, namely an indefinably large crowd that has ceased to be organisable within the existing media system but is now able to look at its functioning, empowered through togetherness, from the outside.

Over the 2000s, i.e. with an ever-increasing focus on economic growth and upward mobility, increased freedom of speech and increasing governmental power, the media landscape has been more and more organised, particularly as far as editorials, news and political talk shows are concerned, in a compartmentalised fashion. Different TV stations, and their associated newspapers and websites, were discernable less by their popularity with audiences – who were clearly not the first concern of most producers – than by their owners’ financial relationship with the government/state structure (having been “bought”) and also by their role within an ideological competition, especially between laicist, liberal, pro-government and religious channels and publications (the latter two not necessarily identical).

This made the media landscape at first sight appear pluralist. In many ways, however, it embodied the very difference between open societal pluralism and what we might call societal segregation – mutual ideological provocation and the resulting neutralisation as a method of practically reinforcing ongoing central political and economic power.

In this context, the infamous penguin documentary, which flickered over the first police brutality unleashed on the Gezi-occupants on 31 May also expressed a genuine helplessness on the part of CNN Türk and any other station for that matter, at being confronted with a de-compartmentalised, active audience that did not look like and did not act like what their accustomed narratives and patterns of representation could capture.

The 11 June violence conveyed in the cartoon, on the other hand, seems to have triggered a phase, lasting up to the raiding and closure of Gezi Park on 15 June, in which the government-induced logic of conspiracy and battle of interpretations was bought into by the protestors at least to a degree, and particularly by those mobilised into support abroad.

The government, aside from rapidly organising Erdoğan’s series of rallies on the “Respect for the National Will”, with which he openly claimed “his” 50% of the vote, increasingly used digital media too, for instance with the upload of nearly 30 videos that, accompanied by the menacing music familiar from Turkish news programmes, “documented” the vandalism and destruction the protestors allegedly caused.<sup>[5]</sup> Countering this was a huge wave of social media postings and web articles, many from outside Turkey. People were indiscriminately posting and re-posting whatever came their way to “disprove” government allegations and prove its “fascism” on various levels and at any cost, eventually generating the largest number of highly dubious postings that I have so far seen in web-featured protest situations.

Some of the pictures circulating of alleged police violence turned out to be photographs of accident victims or taken from manuals for the treatment of burns. Effectively complicating the real documentation of violence, and inadvertently lending support to Erdoğan’s agenda, these postings

also confused protestors on the ground, who were less and less sure what information to rely on and some of whom now resorted to adding the message, *gerçektir* (real, trustworthy) to their own postings.

The closure of Gezi Park thus marked not merely a low in the protests but also in the employment of social media, from which protestors were quick to draw conclusions. It was not that “truth” was set aside. Rather that, at least at this point, it could not be found in or through the media. “Duran adam”, the standing man who appeared, doing and saying absolutely nothing, shortly afterwards in Taksim square, in many ways embodied a “point zero” of action/ reaction, mediation and interpretability, while at the same time providing protestors, (swift to follow the example) with a way of regaining what had been their original strength: a refusal to be compartmentalised, to “other”, to pay back in the same currency.

From then onwards, it was noticeable how many protestors’ activities were engaged in a practice of, as someone put it, “permanently shifting the contact surface” again through physical performance, with the effect of always moving a step ahead of government action and interpretation and taking the steam, at least to an achievable degree, out of police aggression.

A great example of this was the setting up, with the beginning of Ramadan on 09 July, of the longest *iftar* (fast-breaking) table that Turkey, and maybe the world, had ever seen, leading all the way down *İstiklal Caddesi*, the main shopping boulevard of the Taksim area, and inviting everybody to bring their food and take part. Organised by the “Antikapitalist Müslümanlar”, a young group around Islamic scholar İhsan Eliaçık, a long-standing critic of the AKP-form of governance, it was to recall the inclusive idea of Islam in contrast to the exclusive function with invited guests that the government was convening at the same time in Taksim square. The caption reads: “The iftar tables have been set apart. But it has been very good this way”, suggesting that it was not the protestors but the government that had initiated the separation.



The “genius” of this activity, and many others in the same vein, was that it eluded media recuperation by the government in terms of legal contempt or violence, but in itself sent a message that the government could hardly discredit or even attack without betraying its own agenda or practise, in this case, the celebration of *iftar*. That the government and particularly its self-organised supporters realised this logic was clear from their response, for instance, the slogan-embossed t-shirts, like this one [\[6\]](#), which inadvertently only underlined their defensive position and their resort



to direct antagonism (and thus reiteration):



Some protestors could not resist, in their social media communication or on public banners, openly

ridiculing retorts like this or the t-shirt slogan in Turkish against “duran adam” that simply read *karşı duran adam* (“counter-duran adam”), exposing them as lacking any wit and creativity of their own and “just not getting it”. University students have been particularly prone to mocking the whole AKP-constituency as retarded, ignorant wannabes. But during the, purportedly, rare instances that headscarf-wearing girls and women were scorned or even attacked, other protestors have criticised such behaviour or set a counter example.

Yet, such incidences underline the difficulty of continuously eluding the logic and violent practise of segregation and de-legitimation that Erdoğan almost personally pursues, and of refuting the allegation, not only from pro-government circles, that the protests are an affair of the young, urban, secular, educated members of the middle to upper middle classes who can hardly hope to ever win lasting support with the upwardly mobile and pious small-town population and city migrants. Matters are, moreover, exacerbated by an often self-serving international media which, after first lecturing the Turkish government in a patronising “AKP-leaders have to accept” or “Erdoğan has to learn”-mode, have of late taken to simply ridiculing the man in a remarkably a-historical fashion rather than attempt a more nuanced critical analysis that might avoid, as Timur Hammond has recently compellingly argued, providing ammunition for exactly the conspiracy theories they are trying to expose as absurd.<sup>[7]</sup>

Doubtless, as some protestors themselves fear, “Gezi” has the already obvious potential for becoming a mere fetish amongst young urban media-savvy protestors and foreign social media users alike. But to use that tendency as an argument for lacking long-term relevance as protests means either expecting too much or hoping for far too little – and falling straight into the media-trap.

The uprising has, sometimes to the incredulity of protestors themselves, built bridges not merely between ideological antagonists but also between classes. The AKP has by no means only supported an equal Muslim society, even though some of its reforms were clearly social and justice-oriented, but has also created, in its neoliberal course, sharp lines between a new and very wealthy upper class, an aspiring middle class and the dispossessed, all of whom are no longer simply separable from their “secular” counterparts.

In particular, the protests included members of many societal groups - Kurds, Alevis, Roma, feminists (female and male), LGBTs, to name but a few – who Erdoğan, blinded by the many wilful legal and social humiliations during his party’s ascent to legitimate power, has obviously thought that he could either completely ignore, pacify, win over, play off against each other or subsume under an increasingly openly majoritarian Hanafi Sunni rule, with no serious opposition.

So while it is important to estimate the protests’ future prospects in the face of their waning strength, no-one should underestimate what has been accomplished in the span of merely six weeks. Particularly Erdoğan, who conceives of himself as the embodiment of all that Turkey could ever achieve in terms of democratisation, has been forced to face the direct public mass presence of protestors, not only in Istanbul but in many other cities as well, whom he has serious trouble in understanding, not merely because he disapproves of their lifestyle, sexual, political or religious orientation or ethnic belonging, but because they appear entirely voluntary and together.

The protests have stirred up the mass media, which may not fool themselves into thinking that the AKP, and hence their financial and/or ideological security, will cave in at the next elections, but which certainly realise that there is another, unprecedented force to be reckoned and potentially to cooperate with. The protestors have shown their basic independence from media and the capability of organising their own information channels, not only through social media but also through internet live-streams that have covered intermittent post-Gezi citizen forums in other public parks and places. There, the question of representation itself is also being discussed, i.e. the potential for remaining a non-ideological democratic force and the necessity of forming representative bodies, such as a political party, which necessarily carries the danger of ideological recuperation.

Precisely because Erdoğan has, for the time being, apparently succeeded in polarising society as a whole into loyal followers (anti-protestors) and traitors (protestors), to press for immediate further outcomes may prove counterproductive, however understandable the urge for final substantial change - particularly if this led to more raids, detentions, injured and even dead. But the protests



have already made an enormous impact in questioning not merely a government but the whole logic and history of a deeply ingrained political system.

Henceforth, it should perhaps be referred to as a movement, one which, unlike the Islamic movement before it, already has to overcome a few less hurdles in terms of systematic repression, humiliation and the resulting inferiority complexes, and which is therefore far less prone to the compulsion to “conquer” and thus reify, this system. Rather like the Islamic movement, however, it is very likely, irrespective of whether it is always visible in media terms or not, to continue to make its presence felt.

*I thank Öznur Şahin, Hikmet Kocamaner, Yüksel Yavuz, Saadet Türkmen, Ercan Çayan, Mark David Wyers, Amy Spangler, Sara Merdian and Dilek Akdemir for generously sharing their views and information with me.*

[1] The coup forced the first Islamic prime minister, Necmettin Erbakan, governing with a coalition, to step down, made the headscarf ban absolute in universities and public institutions, and forced media to dismiss pro-Islamic employees.

[2] Zeynep Tufekci, “‘Come, Come, Whoever You Are.’ As a Pluralist Movement Emerges from Gezi Park in Turkey”, in *technosociology* 30 June, 2013 (<http://technosociology.org/?p=1421>).

[3] The feeling of not being the master of the own destiny is not coincidentally very wide-spread in Muslim countries and has little to do with any Islam-guided animosity against the West, or even with Islam itself, but with the experience of having served for decades as an anti-communist bulwark and, usually at the own loss, as disposable variables in geopolitical strategies that left little space for independent politics.

[4] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013\\_Turkish\\_protests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2013_Turkish_protests)

[5] [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncgFKk1c56U&feature=c4overview&list=UU84XAsoXEKGpYqw7RK\\_F9KQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncgFKk1c56U&feature=c4overview&list=UU84XAsoXEKGpYqw7RK_F9KQ)

[6] Significantly, the printing is in English, raising the matter of the intended recipients. It may refer to the knowledge of English amongst many of the university-educated protestors. More likely, though, it means to address the imagined “foreign forces” behind the protests.

[7] Timur Hammond, “The Past Present: Turkey, Erdogan and the Gezi-Protests”, in: *Society and Space-Environment and Planning*, 27 June 2013: <http://societyandspace.com/2013/06/27/the-past-present-turkey-erdogan-and-the-gezi-protests-timur-hammond/>

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 About the author

Britta Ohm is an associated researcher at the Institute of Social Anthropology, University of Bern, Switzerland. She has been conducting fieldwork on the changing media landscapes in India and in Turkey since the 1990s, first as a documentary filmmaker and employee of German public television. Currently, she is finishing a book on post-Gujarat Indian television and working on a project on negotiations between the secular and the Islamic on Turkish television.

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